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ABSTRACT

A University of Calgary seminar in dramatic criticism, intended for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, connects dramatic criticism with actual performance. In the first of a flexible series of units, students explore the meaning of criticism and learn where criticism is found. The second unit focuses on dramatic criticism as a continuing dialogue, rather than as a set of absolute truths. In this unit, students interpret a play produced by the drama department, each student taking a different approach to interpretation. In a unit on reviewing, students' reviews of department productions are read aloud to a group that includes the cast and director; students also review the reviewers of local productions. Subsequent units, dealing with theoretical criticism, require students to apply critics' ideas to department productions and to develop theories of criticism based on large sets of plays. The major course project involves the assignment of each student as dramaturge for one of the department productions. As dramaturge, the student researches and reports on existing criticism that is relevant to the play and acts as adviser to the director and designer throughout the rehearsals, answering their questions about interpretation. (GW)

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A BASIC COURSE IN DRAMATIC CRITICISM

The first point to remember is that the course we are talking about is not really "basic." The first course a student takes in Criticism as a formal discipline is generally at an upper level, and should presuppose a great deal of experience in reading and seeing plays of differing periods and types. At the University of Calgary, for example, my course in Dramatic Criticism is a full-year seminar for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, having as prerequisites two years of undergraduate dramatic literature courses. Now, if we call these previous courses "metadrama," which is to say statements <u>about</u> drama rather than the direct experience of drama itself, then a course in Dramatic Criticism is, in turn, "meta-metadrama," or statements about those statements. At this rarified level, a course should not be taught as a set of information that is just handed over to the student; he or she must be treated as a living, breathing, thinking human being rather than as an ambulatory filing cabinet.

It is a mistake, therefore, to teach such a course as some do, via the historical survey method, as a series of facts—"Dramatic Criticism from Aristotle to Barthes," or whatever. Five years hence, the student will have forgotten half that he has read; unless he goes directly out to teach the same material himself, he won't be able to remember whether Aristotle put "thought" before "diction" or the

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other way around, and he may identify the Three Unities as Olga, Masha, and Irina. The important thing, then, is not so much in what the course adds to his knowledge as in how it changes his intellect. Knowledge and intellect are of course not polar opposites, but ultimately course content cannot be separated from the personalities and experiences of the students. The goals of a basic course in Dramatic Criticism should be to develop each student's intellectual skill, to heighten his perception, to give him a sense of what Dramatic Criticism is, where it is found, why it exists, how it develops, and how it relates to performance. The course should also develop the student's own ability as a critic, in relation to this broad context.

I have therefore structured my seminar into a series of units dealing with each of these goals. Although the units incorporate a good deal of the traditional "Aristotle to X" material, they are not taught in historical sequence, and considerable effort is made to connect the material to the students' experience, to my own personal interests, and to the production season at the University of Calgary and at the local repertory companies. The course thus changes considerably from year to year, and the description I am about to give of it is somewhat hypothetical. It represents my feelings about the course at this moment, and how I shall attempt to teach it this year.

The first unit is entitled, unsurprisingly, "What is Criticism?" This is a more important question than one might think, since I have found that very few students can answer it; in fact, a lot of people teaching drama can't answer it either. The most common error I have noticed is to identify criticism with judgment. The students, perhaps

drawing on their experience of being reviewed in the newspapers, think that we are going to sit around disparaging playscripts and ridiculing actors. I stress that judgment is only one aspect of criticism, that criticism involves analysis and interpretation as well, that, to paraphrase Northrop Frye, value judgment should in fact be based on analysis and interpretation and not vice-versa. We then make the usual distinctions between practical and theoretical criticism, between intrinsic and extrinsic criticism, and between scholarly and popular criticism, which includes reviewing. From this I develop the concept of the critical act as a quasi-mathematical "function," a kind of transformation or projection from a system of thought (whether formally expressed or merely implicit) into an artistic work or works. The job of assessing a critical work thus consists of first determining, as far as possible, the critic's system of thought; second, determining precisely what work or body of works he is relating that system to (which is not always as simple as one might think); and, finally, testing the connections between the system of thought and the work or works for validity and significance. The books I have found valuable in developing a concept of what criticism is are Kenneth Burke's A Grammar of Motives and Roger Gross's Understanding Playscripts; this year I shall be adding my own book, Script into Performance, as well.

In this first unit I also try to answer the question of where criticism is found. The students learn about important critical journals, and how they are indexed; about critical books and anthologies; about critical bibliographies; about scholarly presses and

how they operate; and about theatre reviewing, and the (desultory) way that it is collected and indexed. But I stress, in addition, the ubiquitous nature of criticism. One exercise I have found very valuable here is a covert operation that continues throughout the school year: the students are each given a small notebook, and told to jot down, surreptitiously, all the criticism, of whatever sort, that they overhear in their daily lives. This is to be done in informal situations only, such as chatting in the greenroom; formal criticism found in classrooms or rehearsals is specifically disallowed. The sheer volume of the results shows how inherent criticism is to human beings. Criticism always exists, even when it is not written down; formal, scholarly criticism is just the tip of an iceburg. The exercise exposes the critical atmosphere in which our Department and city operate, the assumptions or "system of thought" our people have concerning drama. (And it is interesting that a considerable volume of this informal criticism always comes from the very people who like to put down criticism as something destructive. As T. S. Eliot said, criticism is inevitable.)

The second unit of the course is entitled "practical criticism." I have found it helpful to get into the actual interpretation of individual playscripts at this stage, rather than into broader, theoretical criticism aiming at large numbers of playscripts or drama in general, which I save for later. For this unit, I have found the Norman Rabkin anthology, Approaches to Shakespeare, to be invaluable. Rabkin provides a series of essays by different critics all focussing on

the text of Macbeth. Each essay taken alone is illuminating and compelling in its argument; yet as a group they provide extremely varied interpretations of Macbeth that are often contradictory. The student thus develops a sense of criticism not as a set of absolute truths engraved on bronze tablets, but rather as a continuing dialogue, in which viewpoints are constantly being expanded, qualified, challenged, and rejected. This helps answer the question, "Why does criticism exist?" as one begins to see the enormous complexity of drama, and the difficulty of understanding it; instead of drama "made simple," I give the students drama "made difficult." We study drama for the same reason that the physicist studies matter, in order to understand our world, the distinction being that for the physicist it is a dispassionate world of particles and forces while for the critic it is an emotional world of virtual human life.

At this point, I assign the students an exercise in which they are to interpret the first play in the departmental production season, each taking a different approach as found in the Rabkin anthology. This year, for example, students will find themselves taking up The Country Wife in terms of imagery, history, ethics, the author's biography, and so on. The resulting essays are then discussed in class, not so much in terms of their absolute value, but rather in terms of the problems each strategy entails. What happens when we analyse imagery in a work of prose rather than one of poetry, for example. Which system of ethics does one choose? How does one insure that biographical information is accurate? And so on. The student begins

to see Dramatic Criticism as what Roger Gross calls a "heuristic" problem, in which the difficulty is not just in the application of a method, but also in the very choice of method.

The next unit is one on reviewing. Largely in response to student pressure, this has developed over the years from a small sub-unit at the end of the unit on practical criticism to a full-fledged unit of its own. The principle difficulty here has always been in finding source material. Very few reviews are ever reprinted at all; when they are, it is either in a very expensive format, like the New York Times Reviews, or as the collected reviews of a single critic, like Shaw, which does not carry through the idea of differing methods. I thus have recourse at this point to a lot of Xeroxing. We also carry on a process, continued throughout the year, of reviewing the reviewers of local productions, although some years this turns into a mere catalogue of misconceptions and errors.

Despite the problem of finding materials, however, I feel that reviewing is an area of criticism that should be studied much more than it is. Everybody complains about bad reviewing, but almost no one does anything about it. The only people who are taking it really seriously are Norman Nadel and Ernie Shier with their Critics' Institute at the O'Neill Center in Connecticut. I myself was very remiss in this area until the students began clamoring for it; several of them have actually gone on to do some professional reviewing, but more than that, I think they wanted the experience of dealing with reviewing in order to learn to give voice to their complaints. More and

more, their rebuttals have been appearing in the local letters to the editor column.

Subsequent units of the course deal with theoretical criticism: one unit, called "deductive theories," deals with authors like Dryden, Freud, and Langer; the other, called "inductive theories," with authors like Aristotle, Frye, and Barthes. (With my growing interest in Structuralism, this last may be saved for a separate unit on that topic.) In these units we deal with works appearing in most traditional courses in dramatic theory and criticism. Each work is treated historically in the sense that we carefully determine the critic's system of thought and his target plays, but the works are taught out of historical sequence and are treated as anything but sacred. It is just as permissible in class to attack Aristotle as it is to attack the reviewer of the Calgary Herald; much as I admire the Poetics, it is a long way from being a perfect and final document.

The student exercises here again consist of applying the critics' ideas to the plays on the production season. (I should note that our department is committed to the idea of focussing on the production season in all its courses; the introductory dramatic literature courses, for example, are taught completely ahistorically, in a series of units based on genres that are in turn based on the plays being produced. Thus a production of The Country Wife generates a unit on Restoration Comedy; one of Ghosts, a unit on Naturalism, and so on.) Thus in the criticism course, when studying Aristotle, for example, a student will attempt to apply Aristotle's conclusions on tragedy to Buechner's

Woyzeck, which the department is producing in March.

But in addition, since at this point we are dealing with theoretical criticism, I give assignments dealing with large sets of plays. Noting the inductive method of Aristotle, for example, in which he first isolates the corpus of Tragedy existing at his time, then generalizes from it, and then makes value judgments based on those generalizations, I ask the student to develop a theory of Tragedy based on a different corpus: say, the tragedies of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and O'Neill. The student is to ignore all other plays, and try to see what happens when he generalizes from this set alone. Can the student, like Aristotle, detect elements of plot common to all? Can he say what kind of plots are best? The important thing, again, is not to learn Aristotle's Poetics by rote, but to live it, or rather to relive the kind of process that Aristotle went through. Only then does the student come to appreciate the Poetics—and also to see its weaknesses. Another student might be told to develop a theory of Tragedy using a deductive approach like that of the neoclassicists. "Don't look at any plays at all," the student will be told. "Start out with some postulates as to what Tragedy should do; then expand that logically into a set of absolute rules." Using this method, the student does not reproduce the Three Unities, but instead creates a set of rules that reflect his predilections and the attitudes of his time. The distinction between the inductive and the deductive methods becomes clear; the student comes to understand why funny things like the Three Unities came into being, rather than just the historical fact of their existence.

The most important aspect of the course is in its attempt to connect Dramatic Criticism with actual performance. Our department is dedicated to making that connection with its production-oriented curriculum, and I myself have written a book that tries to break down the polarity that so commonly exists between the academic and practical sides of theatre. In the criticism course, the connection is made in three ways: first, through the use of local productions as the source of focal plays for exercises and discussions. Examples are drawn, as I have already stated, from department productions and those of the local rep companies, but they are not limited to these. We have had exciting discussions that focus on current films, TV shows, and even commercials. Topics like "Recognition and All New Tempa-Cheer," or "the man from Glad as deus ex machina," enable the student to see criticism not just as something rarified and intellectual, but also as connecting with more ordinary experience, the sights and sounds with which we are bombarded daily.

The second way in which we connect criticism and performance is, again, through the unit on reviewing, and the review exercises that the students themselves perform. Our department has a formal critique after each production in which reviews are read aloud to an assembled multitude that includes the cast and director; principle reviewers are students in the criticism class. But the third and most important method of connection is through the Dramaturg assignment, which is the major project for the course, the equivalent of a term paper. Each student is assigned as Dramaturg for one of the productions on the major season. He is required to research and report

on the relevant criticism for the play, and on prior productions. He also supplies a critical interpretation of his own, using an approach that he feels would be best under the circumstances. He acts as advisor to the director and designer throughout the rehearsals, answering their interpretive questions. In some cases, the student has even delivered lectures to the cast, or written program notes. The use of Dramaturgs, so common in Europe and so rare over here, has a beneficent effect on performance. Not only does it tend to prevent fatuous productions of the "King Lear as Mafia Godfather" type, but it can actually channel the imaginations of the director, designer, and actors in exciting directions. To use an example I have employed many times before, the Dramaturg who points out that Hamlet is described in Shakespeare's text as 30 years old, bearded, and fat could stimulate a production that was more exciting, more controversial, yet more significant than a version with Hamlet as a rock musician.

At the University of Calgary, productions that have used Dramaturgs have almost always turned out better than those that did not. There are problems, of course; in one celebrated case, the director and Dramaturg argued bitterly before and during the production, walked out on each other during the critique, and never spoke to one another again. Despite our philosophy of connecting performance and academic work, we have had, like other departments, our share of anti-intellectual directors who want nothing to do with criticism. This presents special problems for the criticism course;

I cannot force a Dramaturg on a director, and if I talk the director into something he really doesn't believe in, the results may be another historic battle. In such cases, then, the student reports to me for his Dramaturg assignment, as if I were the director. This is not an entirely satisfactory solution. Yet the resistance of directors to dramatic criticism is one of the very problems that I am trying to correct with the Dramaturg assignments; I hope, in time, that the success that comes from using Dramaturgs will help in reducing such prejudices, and the anti-intellectualism that exists in our theatre generally.

In sum, then, my course in Dramatic Criticism stresses less factual information than many such courses, and more student activity, especially activity that connects with theatrical production. I have called such an approach a "dramaturgical" one, just as criticism that draws on performance can be called "dramaturgical criticism," which is one of the major concerns of my life. But I would not want someone at another university merely to copy my course outline. In fact, that is the whole point. Each must find a course content that is valid for his or her interests, his or her students, and his or her theatre.

COURSE GUIDE 12

COURSE Drama 542 TITLE Seminar in Dramatic Criticism. ~~XXXXX~~FULL F/W/P/S

TYPE: ~~XXXXXXXX~~ SEM LOCATION SECTION(S) 1 LIMIT 15

PROFESSOR(S) Hornby

Pre-requisite for entry Drama 340 or consent of the Department.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the critical process itself, rather than examining plays directly. Students who take it should therefore have previously read and seen large numbers of plays from differing periods.

Documents from Aristotle's Poetics through essays by contemporary critics are read. The course is not an historical survey, however, but rather an analytical study from a generally Structuralist viewpoint. Criticism is defined as a "function," a kind of transformation or projection from a system of thought (whether formally expressed or merely implicit) into an artistic work or works. The job of analyzing a critical work thus consists of 1. defining, as far as possible, the critic's system of thought; 2. defining precisely what work or body of works he is relating that system to (which is not always as simple as one might think); and finally, 3. testing the connections between the system of thought and the work(s) for validity and significance.

There is a study of both practical criticism (the interpretation of individual plays, whether in written form or in production), and theoretical criticism (the study of broad categories of drama, or drama in general). Special note is made of traditional critical strategies, and of common critical errors.

Reading, Home Assignments This varies somewhat according to the size of the class; when the class is large, for example, there is more emphasis on written work than when it is small. Assignments usually include: 1. considerable reading of documents; 2. Reports taking different approaches to the plays in the departmental production season; 3. Reviews of productions; 4. Reviews of critical books; 5. Acting as Dramaturg for departmental productions.

Materials and/or Equipment, Estimated Costs

Books: approximately $50. (Somewhat less if Drama 440 or 540 is taken concurrently.)

Method of Assessment & Grading The following is a rough guide only; the exact percentages will be redefined after the class is established.

Participation in discussion	40%
Reports	20%
Reviews	20%
Dramaturg	20%

BOOK LIST

Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives. Univ. of California.

Toby Cole (ed.), Playwrights on Playwriting. Hill & Wang.

T. S. Dorsch (trans.), Classical Literary Criticism. Penguin.

John Dryden, An Essay of Dramatic Poesy. Bobbs-Merrill.

Ehrmann (ed.), Structuralism. Doubleday.

Northrop Frye, An Anatomy of Criticism. Princeton Univ.

Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Norton.

Roger Gross, Understanding Playscripts: Theory and Method. Bowling Green Univ.

Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form. Scribners.

_____, Philosophy in a New Key. Harvard Univ.

Norman Rabkin (ed.), Approaches to Shakespeare. McGraw-Hill.

Hylie Sypher (ed.), Comedy. Doubleday.

All editions are paperback.

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RESERVE LIST

M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp.

Ernst Auerbach, Mimesis.

Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double.

A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy.

Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives.

Barrett Clark, European Theories of the Drama.

F. M. Cornford, Origins of Attic Comedy.

Robert Corrigan (ed.), Comedy: Meaning and Form.

Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics.

De George and De George (eds.), The Structuralists, from Marx to Lévi-Strauss.

William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity.

Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd.

Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre.

_____, The Human Image in Dramatic Literature.

Gavin (ed.), Phenomenology, Structuralism, Semiology.

G. W. F. Hegel, Hegel on Tragedy, ed. Paolucci.

Richard Hornby, Script into Performance.

Walter Kaufmann, Tragedy and Philosophy.

G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire.

Ernst Kris, Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art.

Susanne Langer, The Problems of Art.

G. E. Lessing, Hamburg Dramaturgy.

Macksey and Donato (eds.), The Structuralist Controversy.

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy.

Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature.

Leo Tolstoy, What is Art?

I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism.

George Rowell (ed.), Victorian Dramatic Criticism.

Wylie Sypher (ed.), Comedy.